Executive Council
Labrador and Aboriginal Affairs
February 5, 2008

Historically Significant, Rare Caribou Coats Unveiled in Labrador

The Honourable Danny Williams, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Mark Nui, Grand Chief of the Innu Nation, were delighted today to officially unveil two rare caribou skin Innu coats at the Labrador Interpretation Centre in North West River, Labrador. Accompanying Premier Williams and Grand Chief Nui for this historic occasion were the Honourable Patty Pottle, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs; the Honourable John Hickey, Minister of Labrador Affairs; Peter Penashue, Deputy Grand Chief of the Innu Nation; Chief Anastasia Qupee of the Sheshatshui Innu First Nation; Chief Prote Poker of the Mushuau Innu First Nation; and esteemed Innu elders.

"The Innu should take great pride in these antiquities, which represent an integral piece of our collective history and heritage," said Premier Williams. "Coats of this nature are very rare and the joint agreement between the Innu Nation and The Rooms allows for the continued preservation of these significant examples of Innu culture. The Innu of Labrador have tremendous roots in this country and a strong and harmonious relationship with the land. We now have an extraordinary glimpse into their past through these exquisite works of art."

Through joint partnership, the historically significant coats were purchased by The Rooms Provincial Museum and the Innu Nation. Additional financial assistance was provided by the federal Department of Canadian Heritage, Innu Development Limited Partnership and Vale Inco. The funding provided was critical to the acquisition of the coats as they likely otherwise would have been purchased by private collectors outside Canada. Only 125 Innu-painted caribou skins are known to exist; and only a small percentage of these are in public collections and available for public study.

"The coats are the symbol of the Innu people's pride in their history, traditions and culture. Their safekeeping and their ultimate return to the Innu people symbolize what can be accomplished by governments, private partners and people all working together," said Grand Chief Nui.

"It is with great pride that we see these coats unveiled today here in Labrador," said Minister Pottle. "These coats allow for a deeper understanding of the history of the Innu and their contribution to the rich culture of our province. The Labrador Interpretation Centre continues to be an excellent gateway to that past. I am proud to be a part of a government that holds the preservation of our history in such high regard."

The Rooms Provincial Museum and the Innu Nation acquired the coats through a Memorandum of Agreement with the understanding that the coats will be housed, in the interim, by The Rooms Provincial Museum and managed through a joint management committee with the Innu Nation. Title will be transferred to the Innu Nation following the establishment of an Innu cultural facility that will ensure the long-term curation and preservation of the coats.

The coats became available for sale in 2005 at which time export permits for both were delayed by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (CPERB) in order to provide an opportunity for Canadian Museums to come forward with purchase offers. Due to the considerable cultural significance of the coats, The Rooms Provincial Museum and the Innu Nation partnered for the joint purchase and subsequently secured financial support to assist with the purchase costs.

The Rooms Provincial Museum will have preferred status for loans and exhibition of the coats, allowing The Rooms to document and study this rare tradition, and by exhibiting the coats, build an

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understanding of the complex and sophisticated coat-making tradition that once existed. Additionally, while the coats are in its care, The Rooms Provincial Museum will be responsible for related costs of conservation, security and exhibition.

"The Rooms Provincial Museum's mandate, which the Labrador Interpretation Centre falls under, is to acquire, discover, collect and manage historical artifacts that have a bearing upon the history of Newfoundland and Labrador," said Dean Brinton, CEO of The Rooms Corporation. "I'm proud of The Rooms' efforts and accomplishments in promoting and preserving the history of our great province and its peoples, and especially proud of the partnership we've forged with the Innu Nation."

"The Innu coats are tremendously important," said Tom Paddon, general manager of Labrador operations, Vale Inco. "Relatively few examples of Innu culture survive today. Much of the traditional spiritual way of life was oral and with the passing of the last shamans some years ago physical artifacts such as these coats take on great significance. They are a way for both Innu and non-Innu to learn a little more about the depth of Innu culture that existed in Labrador for so long."

The coats will be on display at the Labrador Interpretation Centre in North West River from Wednesday, February 6, through Sunday, February 10.

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BACKGROUNDER

In December 2005, the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board established a six-month delay on the export of two caribou skin coats after applications to export the coats for sale in the United States was refused by the Canada Border Services Agency. The federal Department of Canadian Heritage subsequently notified museums and Aboriginal authorities in Canada of the artifacts availability to provide them with the opportunity to negotiate purchase in order to keep the coats in Canada.

In June of 2006, The Rooms Provincial Museum and Innu Nation partnered to acquire one of the two coats from William Jamieson, a private dealer in Ontario, and the second from S. Lynne Cotter who had inherited the Cotter coat. The acquisitions were made possible through the generous support of the Department of Canadian Heritage through the Movable Cultural Property Grants Program, with additional funding provided by Vale Inco and the Innu Development Ltd. Partnership.

The Yale coat was produced by an anonymous Innu creator and acquired by Theophilus Yale while he resided at Saint-Andre-Est on the Ottawa River between 1783 and 1805, from Iroquois who had,

in turn, acquired it in northern Quebec. It had remained within the Yale family until 2004 when it was acquired by Mr. Jamieson. Although the painted designs on the coat are somewhat faded, and the garment has suffered some smoke and fire damage, it remains in fine condition and is an excellent example of the complex artistic tradition and belief system of the Cree and Innu.

The Cotter coat was produced by an anonymous Innu creator. It was acquired by James Laurence Cotter between 1864-1889 as a clerk and later Chief Factor with the Hudson Bay Company. Based on the fine condition of the coat, it is presumed to have been produced shortly prior to the previously mentioned dates. The paint is vivid and un-faded, and the workmanship is clearly of very high quality. The painted designs are complex and beautifully rendered.

Historically, the coats were made and worn by the Algonquian-speaking people of the Quebec-Labrador peninsula from the St. Lawrence River north to Ungava Bay and from James Bay and Hudson Bay on the West to the Atlantic coast. Surviving examples date from approximately 1700 through the 1930s. Within living memory, the coats have been in use only in the more northern and eastern areas.

Painted caribou skin coats have significant spiritual value to the Innu as they were used to ensure a successful caribou hunt. In order to hunt caribou "properly," the Innu hunter had to be part of a symbolic exchange that linked the real world and the spirit world. By using hunting gear that was appropriately decorated, the hunter was communicating with the Caribou Master, and showing respect. The content for the design of the coat came to the hunter in a dream. Through dreaming about hunting caribou, he communicated with the Caribou Master. In so doing he received guidance as to where to hunt and how best to do it. After listening to his account of the "hunting dream," his wife would paint appropriate decorations onto the tanned caribou skin coat.

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